

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 227 940

PS 013 415

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TITLE Controversial Issues in Contemporary Early Childhood Education in Japan.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Development; *Day Care Centers; *Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; *Futures (of Society); Gifted; *Kindergarten; Problems; Professional Training; *Public Policy; Reading Instruction

IDENTIFIERS *Japan

ABSTRACT

Japanese society is faced with many problems in the areas of early childhood education and day care--problems which will not be easily solved in the near future. Lack of continuity between early childhood education programs and elementary school curricula, lack of parent involvement in school activities, ambiguity as to the purpose of preschool education, and lack of highly trained and certified teachers in both kindergarten and day care centers are among the issues underlying these problems. As part of the renewal of early childhood education in Japan, these problems must be tackled. However, the first step toward this renewal is reliance on the ability of educators to establish a clear philosophy of education that emphasizes the development of the whole child rather than one that focuses simply on those qualities that seem of most political or economic use within contemporary Japanese society. (MP)

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Controversial Issues in Contemporary Early Childhood Education in Japan

Michio Takeuchi

1. Introduction

In an age characterized by the importation of foreign ideas and modernization, the first kindergarten in Japan was founded in 1876. Attached to the Tokyo Women's Normal School, this was a public kindergarten. Affiliated with Niigata Seisyu Gakko, the first day care was started in 1890, as a private enterprise.

Roughly one hundred years later, early childhood education programs are now found throughout Japan; though compulsory education still begins with first grade. As of 1979, there were 14,622 kindergartens and 21,642 day care centers in operation, with 90% of all five-year-olds enrolled in one or the other. (64.4% of all five-year-olds attend kindergartens; 25.4% are enrolled in day care programs.)

Kindergarten and day care center programs follow regulations set forth in The Fundamental Law of Education (1947), The School Education Law (1947), and The Child Welfare Law (1947).

What follows is an overview of current controversial issues in early childhood education in Japan.

2. Emphasizing cognitive development

Traditionally, the mainstream early childhood education in Japan tended to favor "free" or "open" programs, both in kindergartens and in day care centers. Since World War II, however, and especially during the last decade, there has been an increasing tendency to favor cognitively-oriented educational experiences over the more traditional "open style".

A group calling itself "Cognitively-oriented Education" emphasizes instruction of the 3R's, which, in the case of Japan, means the reading and writing of Katakana, Hiragana, and Kanji (Chinese characters), as well as the development of number skills.

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This group is countered by those who favor "Non-cognition-oriented Education", or "Education for the Development of the Whole Child".

There are really two issues here. The first that cognitive development is emphasized at the cost of paying less attention to other areas of development. The second is that, even within the area of cognitive development, much time is spent focussing on reading and writing, to the exclusion of many other cognitively-oriented activities.

These issues have been debated frequently in recent times. The Mission Reports of the United States Educational Mission to Japan following World War II emphasized the role of language in the intellectual development of the child. Learning to read and write Katakana, Hiragana, and Kanji was viewed as a cumbersome task which may have negative effects on the child's language learning.

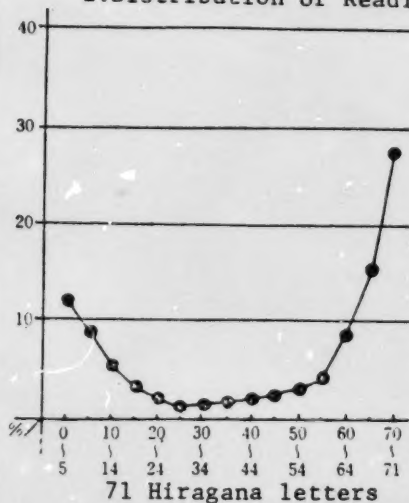
The Kanji system, in particular, was attacked. The Mission Reports strongly recommended abolition of this system, suggesting a gradual phase-out of the use of Kanji and the adoption of a phonetic sign system, such as the Roman alphabet uses.

Even given this serious criticism, all three writing systems, Katakana, Hiragana, and Kanji, are still in use today. Teaching methods are outlined in the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (The Ministry of Education, 1964) and Day Care Center Programs (The Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1965).

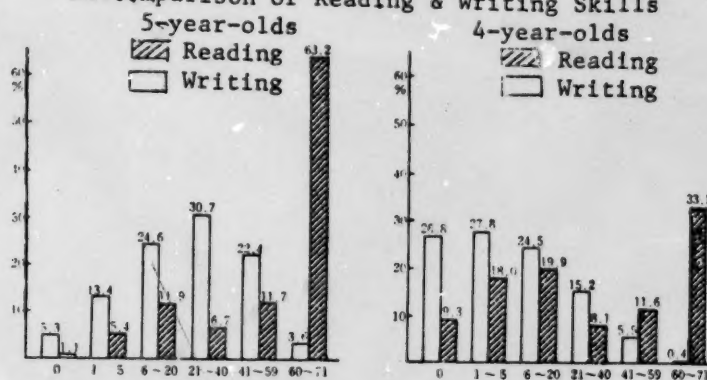
A nationwide survey conducted by the National Institute of Japanese Language Research (Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyujo) in 1967 indicated that about 30% of the four-and-five-year-old children surveyed could read all 71 Hiragana, while 12% could not read any Hiragana. Current theory suggests that once a child is able to read about 20 Hiragana he or she will then make rapid progress in the acquisition of the rest, as well as be able to analyze and abstract syllables.

Figures I and II indicate that it is more difficult to write Hiragana than it is to read it ; 63.2% of the five-year-olds and 33.1% of the four-year-olds could read Hiragana, as contrasted with the percentages for writing discussed above.

I. Distribution of Reading Skills



II. Comparison of Reading & Writing Skills



In supporting the teaching of Hiragana to young children, Kiyoshi Suda, an elementary school teacher, and Kyohei Fujita, a journalist for the Mainichi Shinbun (newspaper), argue that Hiragana should be taught through use of a "syllable method" rather than the "word form" approach currently used in textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education (Suda,1967; Fujita, 1974).

Others emphasize the early learning of Kanji (Chinese characters). Perhaps the most well-known proponent of this position is Isao Ishii, Director of the Educational Research Institute of Daitobunka University. According to Ishii, it is easier for children to learn to read Kanji than to read Hiragana. Moreover, working on analyzing and remembering the more complex strokes

of Kanji is good for the development of the child's memory skills. His method, known as the Ishii Method, stresses the reading of concrete nouns in Kanji, rather than writing, and advocates beginning such instruction with children as young as three-years-old. The Ishii Method is designed to be used by both parents and preschool teachers. Some kindergartens have incorporated this method into their programs, some even granting it "main curriculum area" status. (Needless to say, the Ishii Method has both friends and foes, the former including Kuroda (1972), and the latter, Steinberg and Oka (1978))

The key issue here lies in determining the importance of reading and writing within the curriculum, i.e. are the 3R's being overemphasized in the child's preschool experiences? Is it necessary or desirable for children to learn Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji before entering first grade? At present, we do not have answers to these important questions.

3. "Early Education" and "Early Childhood Education"

"Early Education" has often been used in reference to the education of gifted and talented children in Japan, while "Early Childhood Education" usually refers to the education of (average) children during the preschool years. There has been considerable confusion in the use of these terms.

When Jerome Bruner's "Process of Education" (1960) was first introduced in Japan (1961), many people misunderstood his now-famous hypothesis, i.e. that "Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development". Many Japanese scholars interpreted this as support for the enhancement of early education (Kuroda, 1976), and proposed introducing more complex subjects and tasks into kindergartens and preschools.

Bruner, however, emphasized instruction in the underlying structures and

principles of a given subject, not merely the teaching of subject content.

Above all, he stressed the necessity of a match between instruction and the child's level of development in order for learning to take place.

Unfortunately, misinterpretation of Bruner's theory still persists in Japan, often through errors in translation of his writings.

4. Education for the Gifted and Talented

The goal of gifted and talented education in Japan is to help such children develop their special talents, whether in music, art, academic subjects, or other areas of learning and development. Special training is offered by teachers and specialists, both in home and through private institutions.

One of the most famous of the private programs is the Suzuki Violin Method. Now used widely not only in Japan but in the United States and many European countries as well, Suzuki first began teaching using this method before World War II, applying it to the instruction of all children, not just to the teaching of gifted and talented children.

Essentially, his method stresses five points:-

- (1) start early;
- (2) foster a positive learning environment;
- (3) use better instruction methods;
- (4) practice more often;
- (5) train better teachers.

Suzuki views use of this method, and learning to play the violin, as contributing to the humanization of the education process, as making "talent" accessible to all children. (Critics of education for the gifted and talented include Ogonogi (1971) and Moriya (1976).)

5. Kindergarten and day care center teaching as a profession

In Japan, two different administrative systems are involved in certifying teachers in the area of early childhood education. Kindergarten teachers are required to have completed two to four years of study in order to earn their teaching certificate. This certificate system is graded, and falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education.

Day care center teachers, on the hand, need only to have graduated from middle school, now the upper limit of compulsory education in Japan. However, most day care center teachers have completed high school, and some have attended a junior college or university programs as well. Regulation regarding day care centers are administered by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. A licensing system distinct from the kindergarten teacher certification process is used.

Recent data indicate the following:

Of the 12,000 new kindergarten teachers, only 3.9%(468 teachers) are four-year university graduates. An overwhelming 96.1% are graduates of junior college or other institutions.

As related to the use of grades in the certification system, only 12% of all public kindergarten teachers and 4.8% of the all private kindergarten teachers hold first class certificate, i.e. those who received a 4-year university program (1976 data). This situation is even more serious in the case of day care, where 35% of the teachers have merely passed a licensing exam and 6.92% are teaching with no license at all (1977 data, 48424 total teachers).

Needless to say, there are many differences between the kindergarten and day care center systems, not only in how they are administered but also in the kinds of educational and social experiences children attending either kindergartens or

day care centers receive. A primary concern at present is to add to the minimum requirements for teachers in both kindergartens and day care centers, making completion of a university-level early childhood education course necessary for certification.

6. Extended day care

Typically, a kindergartener spends four hours per day at school, and a child who attends a day care centers is usually there for about eight hours, as regulated by law. Since the 1960's, the number of working women have rapidly increased. With this increase, extended day care has become an important concern in Japan. Issues related to the care of newborns and infants, in particular, are the focus of much attention.

As of 1979, there were 21,622 day care centers enrolling almost two million children. As indicated in following table (Table I), by far, children of working mothers made up the largest percentage of children in day care (1980).

Table I Reasons for Attending a Day Care Center

Mother working	94.2 %
Childbirth	2.7 %
Non-mother	1.2 %
Other	1.9 %

Table II gives the percentage of children in day care according to age.

Table II Percentage of Children in Day Care by Age
(1980; 1,974,886 children)

<u>Age</u>	<u>Percent</u>
0	0.9 %
1	4.0 %
2	9.5 %
3	19.2 %
4	27.3 %
5	28.5 %
over 6	10.6 %
	<u>100.0 %</u>

Despite the fundamental principle that children should not spend more than eight hours per day in day care, the fact is that there are many centers operating for longer hours, offering extended day care for those in need of this service. According to the National Survey of Day Care Centers conducted by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, roughly 74% of a sample of day care centers approved by governor operated extended day programs. In the case of non-licensed centers, the percentage jumped to 92.6%. In the past several years, the number of centers offering night-time care have also increased, with some centers, known as "baby hotels", operating on a 24-hours basis.

Extended day care, and especially the use of 24-hour extended care, raises serious concerns regarding the development of the child, including the meeting of each child's physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional needs.

In order to meet these needs, the quality of center facilities, the qualifications of center staff, and the role of the family all need careful examinations.

(Mitsuo Moriya, Hyogo University of Education, discusses criticism of extended day care programs (Moriya, 1976).)

7. Integrating Kindergarten and Day Care Center Programs

As discussed above, kindergarten and day care center fall under the jurisdictions of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Welfare, respectively. The kindergarten, therefore, is viewed as an educational institution, and the day care center, caretaking facility. The sectionalistic policy adopted by the two ministries has thus far prevented those interested in unifying the two systems, thereby formally including day care programs when referring to early childhood education, from making much headway toward their goal.

Unification plans have been discussed at the level of the Japanese Diet, as well

as by respected organizations in the early childhood education field, including the Japan Teachers Union (Nikkyoso), the Central Council for Child Welfare, and the Japan Child Care Association.

At present, there are several combination kindergarten-day care centers in operation. These programs have not received much support from the prefectural government. For example, to avoid legal problems, the Kitasuma Hoiku Center is forced to use separate buildings, calling one a kindergarten and the other a day care center. In fact, the children are not divided into kindergarten and day care groups: all children use both buildings. Teachers at these combination kindergarten-day care centers must have both kindergarten and day care certification.

8. Conclusion

Japanese society is faced with many difficult problems in the areas of early childhood education and day care, problems which will not be easily solved in the near future. In addition to the specific issues discussed above, issues such as the lack of continuity between early childhood education programs (now non-compulsory) and elementary school curricula, the role of parents and education in the home in the child's experiences, and the underlying purpose of preschool education, must be tackled.

Questions such as, "Should kindergarten become compulsory education and, thereby, freely available to all children?", and "What is the primary role of the preschool, that of education or socialization?" must be asked and, carefully answered.

My personal feeling is that we need to work harder on our philosophy of education, emphasizing the development of the whole child rather than focussing simply on those qualities which seem of most use politically or economically

in contemporary Japanese society.

This paper is a summary of my book, Gendai Yojikyoiku Ronshi (A Contemporary History of Controversial Issues in Early Childhood Education in Japan) Fubaisha Publishing Co., Nagoya, Japan, 1981

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